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ABSTRACT

The 1996-97 school year was the second year of the Children Achieving reform initiative in Philadelphia (Pennsylvania). This summary describes findings from this second-year evaluation. The evaluation team conducted interviews and observations in 21 schools and 14 clusters, interviewing education reform leaders in the school district and throughout the city. More than 300 people were interviewed, including 116 teachers, and more than 7,000 teachers and school staff completed surveys about the reform. Overall, the school district has moved ahead in many ways, but the evaluation team identified four constraints that have influenced or impeded progress. These are: (1) the struggle of the central office to find the right balance between providing sufficient guidance to schools and decentralization; (2) effective communication to the teaching staff and the public about the complex elements of the reforms; (3) time allowed for the changed expectations for teachers and other staff members to take effect; and (4) shortages of experienced personnel, especially at the middle management level, to guide and support the reform changes. Schools are beginning to implement the reforms at the classroom level, and the school district is beginning to implement the accountability structure envisioned in Children Achieving. (Contains five tables.) (SLD)

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CHILDREN ACHIEVING: PHILADELPHIA'S EDUCATION REFORM

PROGRESS REPORT SERIES 1996-1997

A Second-Year Evaluation

Executive Summary

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ABOUT *the* ANNENBERG CHALLENGE

In 1993 philanthropist Walter Annenberg pledged $500 million to help improve the quality of education for America's neediest children. He challenged private donors to match these funds. Nearly 60 percent of the resulting Challenge grants have gone to eight of the nation's largest school districts, including Philadelphia. The Challenge's goals are to support an unprecedented number of public schools to work directly with their local communities; manage their resources in ways that meet the needs of their particular student population; set high expectations for all students; and assess progress through careful and continuous review. The Challenge encourages communities to develop their own strategies to reach these goals. Instead of giving funds directly to school districts, the Challenge works through nonprofit collaboratives in each of its sites, which in turn are supported by staff of the Annenberg Institute.

ABOUT *the* CHILDREN ACHIEVING CHALLENGE

Many innovative school reform plans have foundered for lack of resources. In February 1995 shortly after the School Board adopted *Children Achieving*, The Annenberg Foundation designated Philadelphia as one of a small number of American cities to receive a five-year, $50 million Annenberg Challenge grant to improve public education.

Among the conditions for receiving the grant was a requirement to produce two matching dollars (i.e.,$100 million over five years) for each one received from the Annenberg Foundation, and to create an independent management structure to provide program, fiscal and evaluation oversight of the grant. To assist in meeting both these conditions, the District turned to Greater Philadelphia First, an association of chief executives from the region's largest companies, to help raise the matching dollars and to provide the oversight required by The Annenberg Foundation. A staff was hired, and the *Children Achieving* Challenge came into being.

For the Challenge staff, the initial question was how to harness the, at times, fragmented efforts of various organizations that work with the School District to improve schools. Such organizations usually focus on specific projects but often have been unable to do much to improve the school system as a whole. For this reason, Challenge staff have served as catalysts, conveners and coordinators in a massive collaboration between internal and external partners. As a result, the Challenge has helped bring the School District together with all of its potential partners in a collective focus and a new way of working that can sustain itself long after the Challenge is gone.

Greater Philadelphia First houses the Challenge and provides oversight to it through the GPF Partnership for Reform. In addition to its focus on education, GPF provides leadership on other issues important to the economic development and quality of life of the community.

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ABOUT *the* EVALUATION

The *Children Achieving* Challenge has charged the Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE) and its partners, Research for Action and OMG Center for Collaborative Learning, to conduct a four-year evaluation of Philadelphia's *Children Achieving* initiative. This summary describes findings from Year 2 (1996-97). The findings emerged from a series of reports on *Children Achieving*'s progress in implementing four cornerstones of its reform effort: standards-driven curriculum and instruction; a performance-based system of accountability; decentralization of decision making; and more effective coordination of student support services. The full reports can be obtained from CPRE's Publications Office at (215)573-0700, x233. They will also be available this summer on the CPRE website at www.upenn.edu/gse/cpre/.

How the Evaluation Was Conducted

The evaluation team conducted interviews and observations in 21 schools and 14 clusters; interviewed education reform leaders in the District and throughout the city; and administered a District-wide survey of teachers. In all, the team interviewed more than 300 people, including 116 teachers, observed nearly 40 meetings and professional development sessions, analyzed numerous School District documents and received survey responses from more than 7,000 teachers and other school staff members.

What We Were Looking For

The 1996-97 school year was *Children Achieving*'s second year, but for three-quarters of the District's schools, it was only the first year of the reform. At this early stage, it would not be reasonable to expect to find all schools to be making excellent or even steady progress or student achievement being advanced everywhere. However, the evaluation team thinks it is reasonable to expect that:

1. A clear vision of reform is emerging that is shaping decisions at all levels of the District.
2. Various offices in the central administration are improving the ways they coordinate efforts and resources with each other and with key external partners.
3. New structures, such as the cluster system, the Family Resource Network and the Teaching and Learning Network are in place and functioning well.
4. Schools are beginning to make changes consistent with the reforms, and there are indications that reforms are reaching classrooms and affecting students.
5. The District is monitoring the work of schools and attempting to provide them with the support they need to turn the reforms into reality.
6. There is evidence of increasing support among educators and the public for the improvements.
7. The District is demonstrating a willingness to learn from experience, recognizing problems and obstacles, and addressing them.

The findings summarized indicate how well the School District of Philadelphia and the *Children Achieving* Challenge are meeting these expectations.

HOW REFORM LOOKS *in* PHILADELPHIA

Standards and Accountability

A Snapshot of Philadelphia's Standards and Accountability Systems

In 1995 Philadelphia's Standards Writing Teams drafted academic content standards based on those developed by national professional organizations, such as the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics. Teachers and the public had opportunities to review the standards in draft form before the Board of Education adopted them. The District was careful to note that the standards should not dictate what or how material should be taught. The District also announced (but postponed) plans to develop performance standards (the kinds of work students must do to meet the content standards) and opportunity-to-learn standards (the conditions necessary for achieving the content standards, such as adequate resources and good teaching). However, District officials adopted benchmarks on the SAT-9 assessment as interim performance standards. The District sought to support implementation of the standards with various resources, such as the Office of Best Practices, and activities, including summer professional development institutes for teachers and development of model curricula. The cluster system[1] and the Teaching and Learning Network, which works through cluster offices, provided support for teachers on standards-based instruction.

The District chose the SAT-9, a criterion-referenced assessment, to determine whether students are meeting the standards. Since Philadelphia's standards draw heavily on national standards, the District felt the commercially available SAT-9, which was based on national standards, fit well with the local standards.

The District developed an accountability system for schools that is based on several performance indicators combined into a Performance Responsibility Index (PRI). The index is calculated using SAT-9 scores (which account for 60 percent of a school's score on the index), promotion and graduation rates, and student and staff attendance. The District set two-year PRI targets for each school, and schools are rewarded, assisted and/or sanctioned depending on their performance. In the District's plan, schools that exceed their performance targets will receive rewards. Reconstitution—in which up to 75 percent of a school's staff can be forced to transfer—is the harshest sanction.

The Superintendent and his Cabinet also are being held accountable for improving student achievement through a set of yearly performance goals in areas such as standards, curriculum and instruction, accountability and assessment, and student support services. SAT-9 scores account for 50 percent of their performance, and their salaries and bonuses are tied to these targets.

[1] As part of the *Children Achieving* reform, Philadelphia schools have been organized into 22 groups composed of a comprehensive high school and the middle and elementary schools that feed into it. These organizations are called clusters and are made up of 8 to 15 schools each. Each cluster has staff to provide leadership and support for reform within its feeder pattern schools.

Standards and Accountability Timeline

April-May 1995	SAT-9 administered in first 6 clusters in Grades 4 and 8
August 1995	First 6 clusters formally established
December 1995	Standards Writing Teams convened; writing of standards begins
April-May 1996	Draft of content standards distributed (English/Language Arts, Mathematics, Science and the Arts) for review; SAT-9 administered District-wide in grades 2, 4, 6, 8 and 11
Summer 1996	First 4 sets of standards reviewed by Standards Review Teams
July 1996	Four-day professional development session conducted for teams of teachers on standards-based instruction
Aug.- Sept. 1996	Second draft of above standards distributed to all teachers for review; Standards Curriculum Resource Guides for grades K-4, 5-8 and 9-12 distributed to teachers; 16 new clusters brought on line
Oct.-Nov. 1996	PRI adopted by Board of Education; Public Hearings on recommended standards held in all 22 clusters
December 1996	First 4 sets of Recommended Content Standards, Benchmarks and Performance Examples with minor revisions adopted by Board
January 1997	Review copies of draft standards distributed for Health and Physical Education, Social Studies and World Languages
February 1997	Resource Guide for Standards-based Assessment and Instruction distributed to schools; Plans to reconstitute Olney and Audenried High Schools are announced
April-May 1997	SAT-9 administered District-wide in grades 2, 3, 4, 7, 8, 9 and 11; Second draft of above standards distributed to all teachers for review
July 1997	Final three sets of Recommended Content Standards, Benchmarks and Performance Examples with minor revisions are adopted by the board; Reconstitution decision for Olney and Audenried reversed by arbitrator; Week-long, content-based professional development session conducted for teams of teachers (totaling 1,100) on content standards in English/Language Arts, Mathematics and Science
September 1997	PRI scores made public (232 schools improved, 77 met their targets, and 15 labeled "low progress"); A second week-long, professional development session on content standards is attended by 600 teachers participating in school teams
October 1997	Development of Curriculum Frameworks begins; "Low progress" schools are visited by school support teams which report findings and recommendations
January 1998	Curriculum Frameworks for English/Language Arts, Mathematics, Science and Social Studies distributed to all schools; SAT-9 scores adjusted to correct error by test publisher; Two schools removed from "low progress" list
April-May 1998	SAT-9 to be administered District-wide in grades 2, 3, 4, 7, 8, 10 and 11
August 1998	First cycle of rewards/sanctions based on PRI to be released

Findings about Standards and Accountability

High awareness of standards. The District has succeeded in making nearly all teachers aware of the content standards, and most of Philadelphia's teachers believe the standards can have a positive impact on student achievement. Likewise, about 80 percent of teachers are in favor of District-wide measures of student performance. Since the first set of standards were adopted, the District has distributed supporting materials to teachers, including the Resource Guide for Standards-based Assessment and Instruction in February 1997 and Curriculum Frameworks in English/Language Arts, Mathematics, Science and Social Studies in January 1998, and nearly 2,000 teachers have attended workshops in standards-based instruction.

Teachers' Perceptions of the Standards

Survey of Philadelphia Teachers, Spring 1997

Statement about Content Standards	Percentage of teachers who agreed with each statement
I understand the purpose.	83.2
I believe it has the potential to benefit by students.	80.8
I believe that it already has had positive effects in my school.	57.4
I believe that it already has had negative effects in my school.	22.3
I believe that it has had no effect in my school	35.7

The evaluation team believes the District should continue to address teachers' concerns (see below) about the standards and the accountability system by providing additional materials and further opportunities for professional development, by better explaining the components of the PRI, and by appointing an expert panel to review and monitor the PRI over time. The District's teaching staff must be convinced that the accountability system is fair, and that the District will correct problems in the system when they are identified.

Teachers dissatisfied with initial implementation of standards. The *Children Achieving* evaluation team found that in this second year of implementation, many teachers had serious concerns about the way the District introduced the new content standards, and in the early stages, they felt they had received inadequate guidance and preparation from District administration about how to use the content standards in their classrooms. They lacked understanding about what standards-driven classrooms look like and needed more concrete examples of what was expected of them.

The District distributed draft standards in August 1996 and adopted them in December—not enough time, said teachers, for broad discussion or realigning the curriculum, especially since teachers lacked examples of or materials on standards-based instruction. Within the central office itself, there were debates about whether the District should provide prescriptive curriculum resources in the context of a reform attempting to decentralize decision-making authority to schools. The uncertainty about how much guidance to provide hampered the process of distributing timely information and assistance to teachers—as did key vacancies in leadership positions during this critical time.

Teachers concerned about accountability system. The evaluation team found that most teachers were unreceptive to the new accountability system, calling it "unfair"—often because they did not have a clear understanding of the PRI. Many teachers felt the administration was holding them accountable for results beyond their control. In addition, some of the indicators included in the PRI, such as staff attendance, generated controversy because of the way they are calculated.

Teachers cite misalignment between standards and SAT-9. About one-third of teachers surveyed felt the SAT-9 is well aligned with the District's content standards. The evaluation team believes the survey reflects what teachers have heard from Philadelphia Federation of Teachers officials, who have called for "clearer" standards, and the absence of any material in the spring of 1997 making clear connections between the standards and the SAT-9. The District too has examined the standards' alignment with the SAT-9, and as a result has made some modifications to the assessment and has piloted new test items. The evaluation team recommends that local experts continue to work with Harcourt Brace (the publisher of the SAT-9) to review and improve the assessment's alignment with Philadelphia's standards.

Improvements in SAT-9 scores. Despite teachers' concerns over the delivery of the standards and accountability system and their desire for more professional development resources, clusterwide scores on the SAT-9 and the PRI rose in 1996-97. Two hundred thirty-two schools improved their overall index score; 77 of them met their two-year targets one year early. Thirteen schools were designated low progress schools because they failed to progress adequately or declined.

Other issues. Although many schools received higher PRI scores in 1996-97, these improvements were questioned by some members of the media, a few school board members and some teachers, in part because of misunderstandings of the complex formulas for scoring the SAT-9, for calculating student and staff attendance, and for determining student promotion/persistence rates. The designation of two high schools for reconstitution sparked controversy, primarily for the manner in which the plan was announced. After arbitration, the two schools were not reconstituted. The evaluation team believes that piloting additional student performance measures, such as portfolios and course exams, to supplement the SAT-9 may help broaden understanding and support for higher standards and performance-based assessment.

Teaching Practice

A Snapshot of Philadelphia's Vision of Good Teaching Practice

The Philadelphia standards do not prescribe specific teaching practices, but *Children Achieving* advocates curriculum and instructional approaches that are perceived as supporting student achievement of the standards. These include:

- personalization of the school experience for students that creates positive and productive relationships with teaching staff and other students;
- flexibility in the time it takes for students to work on tasks and master content;
- individualized instruction that focuses on the learner (as opposed to the teacher);
- deep (rather than broad) coverage of subject matter;
- curriculum that reflects the standards, is interconnected and promotes high-level thinking;
- learning that is active, based on real-world problems, constructivist and open to alternative solutions (rather than simply right answers and wrong answers); and
- collaboration among teachers.

Findings about Teaching Practice

Variations in understanding. Through classroom observation, interviews with teachers and the teacher survey, the evaluation team concluded that Philadelphia teachers varied widely in their understanding of how to implement standards in their classrooms, as might be expected in the early stages of implementation. Most teachers believed they understood the standards and felt the standards were clear. But only about one-third of teachers believed they needed to change their classroom practice in order for their students to meet the standards. The majority of teachers the evaluation team interviewed perceived the standards as "nothing new" or simply as subject or topic guides. These teachers used the standards as they would a curriculum, checking off items they already "covered" and concluding that they did not need to change their classroom practice. In contrast, some teachers were re-thinking the design of curriculum units or placing more emphasis on the mastery of the content and skills defined by the standards. Many others were asking students to do more writing and problem solving to prepare them for the SAT-9, which is a more demanding assessment than those previously administered in the district.

Teacher Opinions About the Content Standards
Survey of Philadelphia Teachers, Spring 1997

Opinions	Percentage Response, by Subject		
	English/ Language Arts	Math	Science
The standards are clear.	82.9	82.8	76.8
Most of my students will be able to meet the standards.	46.9	47.1	44.3
I will need to modify or revise more than half of my classroom instruction to align it with the standards.	35.8	37.9	39.9
My school has placed substantial emphasis on achieving these standards.	72.2	73.7	65.1
I have received adequate support in implementing these standards.	59.5	49.1	52.0

Teachers' sense of efficacy. Part of the reluctance to change teaching practice stems from a widespread belief among teachers that conditions of students' lives outside the classrooms are primarily responsible for their poor achievement, and that instructional practice alone is not enough to overcome such problems. (Urban teachers around the country often express such views.) Skepticism about the ability of Philadelphia children to reach the standards due to these obstacles caused many teachers either to dismiss the new standards, assessment and accountability systems as unrealistic, express frustration about what to do and ask for more guidance, or call them unfair. On the survey, 71 percent of teachers reported that they believe that their success or failure in teaching is due to factors outside of their control.

Requests for more guidance. Many teachers struggled to understand how standards apply to their daily work in the classroom. They were frustrated by the lack of time for discussing the standards and their implications on curriculum. They also reported inadequate support and resources from administration to do so. Teachers told the evaluation team that they want more specific illustrations, more guidance and demonstration lessons so they could gain a clearer sense of how to put standards into practice. The evaluation team recommends that the School District increase support for teachers in developing curriculum and in helping them to screen and obtain appropriate materials. In addition, the District should give teachers more opportunities to both interact with teachers who are experienced in standards-based instruction and to examine student work and standards-based curriculum units.

Stanford Achievement Test and Performance Responsibility Index
1997 Scores and Changes Since 1996

	SAT-9 Reading Percent at or above Basic		SAT-9 Mathematics Percent at or above Basic		SAT-9 Science Percent at or above Basic		Total Performance Responsibility Index[2]	
Administrative Cluster	1997	Change Since 1996	1997	Change Since 1996	1997	Change Since 1996	1997	Change Since 1996
Audenried	**37.3**	**6.8**	**23.6**	**7.9**	**28.4**	**7.6**	**63**	**6.6**
Bartram	44	10.3	24.8	7.2	29.3	9.2	66.2	8.5
CHAIN	**63.2**	**10**	**47.1**	**7.4**	**47.9**	**9.6**	**73.6**	**7.4**
Edison	36.7	7.8	23.1	6.3	24.5	7.7	59.6	7.5
Fels	54.2	5	35.6	3.8	35.3	4.7	68.2	5.7
Frankford	54.6	8.6	34.8	6	37.7	6.7	68.8	5.5
Franklin	49.4	12.8	33.1	8.1	32.9	8.2	66.5	8.5
Furness	53.8	4.8	39.7	9.2	37.7	9.5	69.1	5.9
Germantown	56.5	4.9	32.2	3	33.7	9.7	69	5.2
Gratz	33.3	8.8	20	7.7	20.6	5.5	58.5	6.4
Kensington	49.1	6	32.8	1.9	35.5	3.7	65	6.2
Lincoln	57.3	5.8	34.7	3.8	38.3	3.9	68.2	5.7
ML King	**50.7**	**2.1**	**34.8**	**5.9**	**33.1**	**6.3**	**66.6**	**3.5**
Northeast	66	10.4	44.3	5.5	45.6	7.1	74.3	7.9
Olney	**42.3**	**8.1**	**26.1**	**8.6**	**27.7**	**8.4**	**61.7**	**6.5**
Overbrook	45.9	11.5	22.5	3.6	27.1	5	63.7	6.8
Roxborough	56.5	12.7	29.9	6.2	31.9	5.2	67.8	8
South Philadelphia	50	3.7	32.3	3.7	34	5.2	65.8	3.9
Strawberry Mansion	**34.6**	**2.6**	**17.7**	**0.3**	**23.9**	**5.6**	**59.2**	**1.2**
University City	40.7	10.7	17.6	4.3	20	4	60.1	6.4
West Philadelphia	**39.2**	**5.2**	**22.6**	**5.4**	**25.7**	**4.3**	**62.1**	**4.7**
William Penn	41.4	9.6	22	9.5	17.2	6.3	60	9.1
District Elementary	**53**	**7.1**	**35.3**	**6.7**	**39.6**	**7.8**	**70.3**	**5.7**
District Secondary	**34.9**	**9**	**14.8**	**2.8**	**8.7**	**3.5**	**48.3**	**7.5**
Overall District	***48.1***	***7.5***	***29.8***	***5.6***	***31.4***	***6.6***	***65.7***	***6.1***

☐ The shaded clusters are in the first cohort.

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[2] The PRI includes student and staff attendance and promotion and persistence rates in addition to SAT-9 scores.

Most instructional approaches are "transitional." Through classroom observation and the teacher survey, the evaluation team found that most Philadelphia teachers' instructional practices can be described as "transitional." That is, at this point many teachers are beginning to change their teaching practice to support standards by supplementing traditional methods—such as teacher-directed activities and discussion, question-and-answer sessions and drill-and-practice activities—with "constructivist" or standards-based methods, such as small group activities, open-ended discussions and responsive writing or journal entries.

Efforts to improve SAT-9 scores underscored this finding. The evaluation team learned that many teachers devoted classroom time, particularly in early spring, to preparing students for the assessment. Teachers recognized that the SAT-9 demands that students develop critical-thinking and problem-solving skills, and many attempted to take this into account in their classroom instruction. However, their practice did not always reflect their intentions. Sometimes they used the old drill-and-practice techniques, which are not effective in preparing students for the kinds of open-ended tasks on the test. Nevertheless, Philadelphia schools showed improved SAT-9 scores in 1997 compared to 1996. (See chart on page 11.)

Decentralization

A Snapshot of Philadelphia's New System

School level. Local school councils of teachers, parents and administrators are being created to govern each school's policies and resources. Small learning communities, or "schools-within-schools," consisting of 400 or fewer students are being developed to provide more personal, responsive and caring instructional environments. They are empowered with (and accountable for) decision-making responsibility and resource allocation.

Cluster level. Philadelphia has created 22 clusters of schools, each consisting of a comprehensive high school and its feeder middle and elementary schools. Cluster offices are expected to serve as the locus of professional development, instructional leadership (through the Teaching and Learning Network) and social services.

Central administration level. The central office is responsible for setting up District-wide standards and accountability systems; monitoring schools to ensure equity; providing examples of best practices; and solving problems using a customer-focused, service organization model.

Findings about Decentralization

Schools: teachers more involved in decision making. Because more decision making is pushed to the school level under *Children Achieving*'s decentralization, the evaluation team examined how teachers felt about decision making in their schools. As the following table demonstrates, many teachers reported a high level of collaboration and some shared decision making with administrators at their schools, but most felt they have gained more influence over classroom-related decisions than schoolwide decisions. A majority of teachers saw their principals as clear communicators, but fewer—especially middle school teachers—viewed principals as effective managers or instructional and organizational leaders.

Local school councils: function unclear. At this early stage, implementation of local school councils was proceeding unevenly. Most schools have multiple and sometimes overlapping or competing decision-making structures. Principals need to play a key role in linking these structures and helping to focus their work, but they do not always have the vision and facilitation skills to do so. There are few incentives for establishing councils because they lack the legitimacy and authority necessary for effective school-based management, in part, because the current agreement between the District and the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers limits their role.

Small learning communities (SLCs): signs of improvement. SLCs are spreading rapidly across the District. Teachers surveyed had high hopes that SLCs can help to improve teaching and learning, and the evaluation team observed that the SLCs that designate leaders and provide them with release time offer better support for teachers and students. At this stage of implementation, SLCs take a variety of forms and do not always conform to the District's model in terms of developing instructional themes that cut across subject matter or of partnering with outside institutions.

Teacher Involvement in Decision Making

Survey of Philadelphia Teachers, Spring 1997

Statement	Percentage of teachers who agreed with each statement, by school level			Total Percentage
	Elementary Schools*	Middle Schools	High Schools	
The principal, teachers and staff collaborate to make this school run effectively.	73.1	60.6	62.7	68.1
Teachers are involved in making the important decisions in this school.	56.4	50.6	37.8	50.4
Teachers have a lot of informal opportunities to influence what happens here.	56.3	50.8	45.2	52.3
Most teachers are active in decision making and/or planning committees.	29.5	20.9	15.8	24.3

* Includes K-8 schools

Clusters: defining roles. Philadelphia's 22 clusters vary widely in terms of funding available to cluster offices for staffing and school supports (ranging from $81 to $475 per student). Cluster leaders have taken different approaches to guiding school improvement; some believe the cluster should offer strong instructional direction, while others believe schools should decide what constitutes good practice with the cluster office responding to their requests for support. For the most part, clusters are not developing coherent strategies to support school improvements that are based on a holistic assessment of where schools are. Depending on funding and staff background, cluster offices tend to take on one of four primary roles: disseminating District policies and priorities; providing customized, school-based technical assistance; developing networks for teachers, administrators, support personnel, parents and students; or serving as brokers to connect schools with outside agencies, coalitions and other resources. The evaluation team found that cluster staff show a high level of commitment to *Children Achieving*, but that the effectiveness of cluster staff could benefit from increased use of professional development strategies for strengthening schools' decision-making processes and use of data.

Central administration: some progress but work remains. The Cabinet has been expanded to include the Executive Committee (made up of high-level district staff and the executive directors of the Philadelphia Education Fund and the *Children Achieving* Challenge) plus all 22 cluster leaders and key central administrators. During the 1996-97 school year, most Cabinet members reported an increased seriousness of purpose in their work and improved coordination among offices and programs, although cluster leaders were often dismayed that decision making was still operating in a "top-down" mode. The *Children Achieving* Challenge has remained an integral part of the District's reform efforts. Its seven

Work Teams, each of which is made up of staffers from central office, clusters, the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers and sometimes schools and other partners, made strong progress in coordinating professional development and budgets during the 1996-97 school year. Likewise, the Philadelphia Education Fund played a key role in assisting with standards development and channeling resources to clusters.

The central office struggled to understand its role in a decentralized system during 1996-97. For example, staffers could not reach consensus about the central office's role in guiding the implementation of standards or assisting schools with the process of decentralization. Shifting to a customer-focused stance also proved difficult. The central office created a School Support Network that is supposed to be a direct link between it and clusters and schools, but it initially encountered problems in defining exactly how the network would work. Finally, the District made little progress in two important areas: developing a system for effective recruitment, selection, professional development and assessment of principals and developing and distributing best-practices resources to help schools implement standards.

The evaluation team recommends that District leaders re-visit the decentralization elements of the *Children Achieving* theory. They should articulate a clear vision for governance that takes into account current realities (such as existing agreements with the teachers' union) and lays out steps for moving forward. The School District should develop standards and benchmarks for best practices in developing a "customer-focused" central administration, professional development, coordinating budgets, guiding school improvement, and using data. Recruitment, selection and professional development of school-level leadership should become a top priority.

Student Support

A Snapshot of Student Support

The Family Resource Network (FRN) is the District's primary mechanism for revamping student support services. The main goal is to diminish the District's role as a service provider and boost its role as coordinator, linking a cluster's in-school resources, such as nurses and guidance counselors, with community services, such as social workers and youth centers. At the central administration level, an FRN management team works with about 20 specialists. Each cluster is supposed to have an FRN coordinator, but due to budget constraints, only nine did in 1996-97. Schools continue to have traditional student support staff, including guidance counselors and nurses, who work with cluster FRN staff.

Findings about Student Support

Challenges of restructuring. In these early stages, the District faced some difficulties in implementing its ambitious structural changes aimed at decentralizing authority for student support services and diverting funding from central administration to clusters and schools. These changes were intended to give schools more decision-making power and to reorganize the work of support professionals around four clear goals—improve student attendance, student health, school safety and family and community involvement—each with targets.

However, not all of the budget savings at the central office level filtered down to the school level as originally intended, but were used instead to offset the District's budget deficit. One result of this was that cluster-level student support staff tended to view decentralization negatively, accusing the central office of "dumping" additional responsibilities on them, particularly in the area of special education, without giving them additional resources to do the job.

School-based professionals also felt that their responsibilities increased due to a reduction in the number of supervisors. The District's success in educating them about new roles was limited in 1996-97. Student support staff who worked in clusters with FRN coordinators experienced less anxiety about the changes and fewer feelings of isolation, but they were no more deeply engaged in the *Children Achieving* vision than their counterparts in clusters without FRN coordinators.

In addition, the District's focus on separating support services from instructional components (with the well-intentioned aim of freeing teachers from duties that distract them from teaching) created problems by denying the inherent links between these two areas. The evaluation team recommends that the FRN should place more emphasis on the role of classroom teachers in accommodating students with complex social and educational needs.

Defining the role of the FRN. FRN central office staff made significant progress in building stronger relationships with other city agencies during the 1996-97 school year, and in interviews with the evaluation team, both school-level student support staff and leaders of other city agencies expressed positive views of the goals of the FRN. However, in these early stages of the initiative, they also struggled to translate the goals of the Family Resource Network into practice. Leaders of other city agencies wondered what it would mean for the District to reduce its involvement in social service provision; school level staff often did not see the need to alter their practice. Under the new FRN structure school-level student support staff had better access to professional development opportunities than they had in the past, but these efforts were still insufficient in terms of time and resources to help them think of their jobs differently. The evaluation team believes the District should seek to help school-level staff redefine their roles through improved communication and more intense professional development opportunities. It also should continue to make efforts to better define its role in relation to other agencies that serve children and families in the city.

Progress in health care and attendance. The School District did make progress in most of the FRN goal areas during 1996-97. In particular, the FRN helped more than 2,500 students obtain health insurance and primary care physicians. Average daily attendance rose to 86 percent of enrollment, and more than 4,000 new volunteers became involved in the schools.

CONCLUSION

In the section About the Evaluation (page 4), we identified seven expectations that the public might have about the work of the School District in the context of the *Children Achieving* reform at the end of its second year. Overall, the School District of Philadelphia moved forward in each of these seven areas during 1996-97 (see below), but the evaluation team has defined four constraints that have influenced or impeded progress:

- The District's central office has struggled to find the right balance between providing sufficient guidance to schools while trying to decentralize decision making down to the school level.
- Communicating effectively to teaching staff and the public about the complex elements of the *Children Achieving* reforms has proved to be a challenge.
- Expectations for teachers and other staff members have changed significantly, requiring fundamental shifts in their practice and their conception of their roles which takes training, on-site support and time.
- The School District had shortages of experienced personnel (especially middle managers at the school level, such as principals and assistant principals) to guide and support the *Children Achieving* reforms.

In light of these constraints, we address each of the seven expectations laid out earlier in this report below.

1. Is a clear vision of reform emerging that is shaping decisions at all levels of the system?

The central office and the District's partners worked hard during the 1996-97 school year to develop goals, plans and supporting materials to articulate the vision of *Children Achieving*. Clusters are important sites for communicating this vision, although they vary in their approaches. The evaluation team found that understanding of the *Children Achieving* vision was uneven, and this affected the way decisions were shaped at all levels of the system. Staff at various levels do not fully understand the implications for practice or how to define their new roles. As a result, many do not understand how profoundly their practice must change.

2. Are various offices across the District improving the ways they coordinate efforts and resources with each other and with external partners?

The *Children Achieving* Challenge's Work Teams helped better coordinate professional development opportunities with outside partners (particularly the Philadelphia Education Fund) in 1996-97 than during the previous year. The District also made progress in coordination within the central office, although the finance and personnel departments resisted the "customer-focused" stance to which others in the central office aspired. The evaluation team also found that multiple initiatives in the District often made competing demands on cluster staff and schools.

3. Were new structures, such as the cluster system, the Family Resource Network and the Teaching and Learning Network in place and functioning well?

The cluster structure was expanded from six clusters in the first year to 22 clusters (the entire District) during 1996-97. With all the clusters up and running, the Teaching and Learning Network was fully implemented across the District, although it was not fully staffed until January 1997. The Family Resource Network also expanded its reach, although not every cluster was able to hire a coordinator during the 1996-97 school year.

The evaluation team found that these structures were the base for much of the energy and enthusiasm for *Children Achieving*, although their roles and purposes were still being refined and school staff were still learning how to use their services. Clusters varied widely in their approaches to their guidance role; the FRN had developed concrete objectives, but its overall approach was poorly understood among school-level staff; and the TLN was trying to overcome a late start in the enormous challenge of helping teachers shift to standards-based instruction.

4. Were schools beginning to make changes consistent with the reforms, and were there indications that reforms are reaching the classroom and affecting students?

Schools were beginning to implement the reforms in the 1996-97 school year. For example, almost all schools were experimenting with small learning communities, attempting to meet the requirements of the District as they perceived them. Nearly every school made efforts to prepare students for the SAT-9 test and encouraged higher student and teacher attendance to boost scores on the PRI, although their strategies varied significantly. Teachers were aware of the standards, although classroom practice was changing only incrementally as of Spring 1997. Schools put a lot of effort into finding curriculum materials and textbooks that aligned with the standards. Schools were implementing the standards unevenly, and their efforts were often seriously undermined by constraints such as weak leadership.

5. Is the District monitoring the work of schools and attempting to provide them with the support that they need to turn the reforms into reality?

Children Achieving's primary monitoring mechanism, the Performance Responsibility Index (PRI), was put in place in the 1996-97 school year. Schools participated in the second round of SAT-9 testing in Spring 1997, and the District implemented a school review process for low progress schools in Fall 1997, which we will discuss in next year's report. Our research from 1996-97 showed that the PRI is not widely understood, and there is significant disagreement about its assumptions as a measurement tool, factors which would seem to limit its effectiveness.

6. Is there evidence of increasing support among educators and the public for the improvements?

We have no data on the public's view of the reform initiatives. Many of Philadelphia's business and civic leaders seem to be encouraged by the seriousness of the School District's reform effort and the opening up of the system to partnerships and collaboration. The survey data collected in 1997 show that teaching staff support the overall goals of reform and many, but not all, of its components. During the 1996-97 school year, significant disagreement existed about key pieces of the reform between the District and important partners, particularly the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers, although this relationship had begun to improve by summer. Here, too, we see the complexity of the reform and the challenge of communicating concretely about it as hindering progress in obtaining support.

7. Is the District demonstrating a willingness to learn from experience, address problems, and recognize and correct mistakes?

The District showed a willingness to seek out feedback and address problems. For example, the central office coordinated and designed professional development activities with key partners, more effectively integrated central office and field efforts, and responded to teachers' calls for support on the standards in the form of the Curriculum Frameworks, which it distributed in January 1998. Teachers' progress in implementing standards-based instruction will depend largely on the District's ability to diagnose and respond to past and current issues and its recognition of the need for significant and strategic support through professional development, school-level leadership and supportive school conditions. For progress to continue at a reasonable pace, the District also must address the four constraints identified above.

Finally, the District has been fully cooperative with the evaluation team, providing access to key personnel and information. The District has also shown an openness to feedback from the evaluation team and a willingness to discuss and address implementation problems identified by the evaluation. The teacher survey data also has been widely used within the district to assess conditions and set priorities. Overall, the behavior of District and school personnel indicates a strong desire to learn from experience and improve their performance.

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